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ABSTRACT

The paper describes and evaluates the development of materials produced by the Organization of American Historians' (OAH) project entitled "Restoring Women to History." Contributors to the OAH project faced several choices in developing guidelines for incorporating women's history into the basic American survey at the college level. The guide's combination of conventional historical periodization and unconventional content reflects conscious decisions on the part of the compilers concerning audience and scope of the project. While the course is targeted for conventional history instructors, it assumes a crucial distinction between U.S. history, which is predominantly political and economic, and history of the American people, which emphasizes social trends. Thus, standard topics such as "Reconstruction" and "The Machine Age" include a preponderance of social and women's history. To present women as central characters in American history, the survey utilizes the theme of public and private spheres in American life, pointing out that in politics, for example, the close association of women and the private sphere was used to justify their exclusion from formal political life. The guide also offers suggestions for presenting famous women as legitimate representatives of the women's experience. (LP)

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PLACING WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE AMERICAN HISTORY SURVEY

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The purpose of the materials being produced by the OAH project, "Restoring Women to History," is at once lofty and mundane: Lofty, because those who have participated in the project are committed to transforming the basic survey courses so that they present the history of women as well as the history of men; mundane, because those who have participated in the project have devoted considerable time and intellectual energy simply to producing some basic guides for those who teach surveys. The project rests on some serious political and theoretical premises, namely, that women as well as men have participated in the making of our history, that to take account of women's participation it is worth rethinking the material that absolutely must be "covered" by the survey, that taking account of women's participation means granting some recognition to the complexity of women's history and not just tacking on a few examples of notable or notorious female figures, and that taking account of women's history may not simply render overdue justice to the ladies but actually shed fresh light on our favorite historical commonplaces. But the goal of the project has not been to produce a theoretical treatise. The goal has been to make the findings of women's history available to survey teachers and to demonstrate, as practically as possible, how those findings can be effortlessly communicated to beginning students as an integral part of history. Obviously, to state the goal is not the same as realizing it. In fact, the realization depends upon the many instructors who will draw from these guides, each in his or her own way.

One point requires special emphasis at the outset. These materials should not be confused with formal lesson plans, much less with a textbook. They are not intended to replace years' worth of painstakingly collected lecture notes. They are intended as a kind of running dialogue with survey instructors, or, if you prefer, a series of strategies that the authors of the guides are proposing to survey teachers. To be sure, the dialogue, as presented in the guides, is rather one-sided: The authors of the guides propose; those who use the guides do not have the opportunity to challenge directly. And I do not take lightly the frustrations that such an unequally structured dialogue can impose on its silent partner. I still remember my own rage, reading Plato's Dialogues, when Socrates would say, "Well, now that you have granted premise X" -- which I believed his interlocutor should never have granted at all. So much for the fairness of so-called dialogues -- but then who ever expected life to be fair? I underscore the point not because I am claiming fairness, but because I wish to insist as forcefully as possible that the authors of the guides are offering possibilities, not pretending to dictate a new orthodoxy.

Because of the form the final versions of the guides are assuming, those of us who have worked on them may have exposed ourselves to the misunderstanding that we are proposing a new orthodoxy. Formally, the guides are extremely conventional. They follow the standard -- insofar as there is a standard -- textbook presentation of the American survey. Take the course outline for the second half of the survey: Reconstruction; The Transformation of the South and West; The Machine Age; The

Gilded Age; and on to those radically subversive headings, The Twenties, Crash and Depression, straight down to the 1970s. Then turn to the content of the topics that are suggested for various lectures: There you will find an overwhelming preponderance of women's history laced with a heavy dose of social history. The worst of both worlds, you may say, or, somewhat more charitably, a display of well-intentioned confusion. Certainly, there appears to be something here to provoke everyone. Should we, paraphrasing Carl Degler, simply admit that women and mainstream history are "at odds?" Obviously, I think not, else I should hardly have devoted as much time to the project as I have. But the problems must be faced. What did the authors of the materials intend by presenting such a conventional framework and such unaccustomed content?

For those who have considered the project from the perspective of women's history, our use of the conventional framework has frequently seemed nothing short of a sell-out. Since, the straw woman I am inventing for the occasion would argue, women's experience has been so radically different from that of men, since women have been so effectively excluded from so much of the playing-at-politics and wielding-of-power in our history, since women have so much built their worlds around child-bearing and child-rearing, around protecting life and easing death, historical fidelity to their experience requires a completely new historical periodization. What, to paraphrase another worthy, has the fireside to do with the Congress? For a course in women's history, even more a course in women's studies, this question is compelling. Although even those courses must, presumably, take some account of state houses, courts, and markets. But,

those working on the project decided, the survey is not ready to become a course in women's history. We decided, quite frankly, that the mission to convince conventional instructors of history of the importance of women's history was more pressing than the mission to convince historians of women of the importance of convential history. Admittedly, a tactical decision, but not entirely an opportunistic one. If I had to reduce our reasoning to a basic point, I should say that we implicitly made a rather arbitrary distinction between the history of the United States and the history of the American people.

If you can accept this distinction, at least provisionally, you will see that women, on the face of it, play a larger role in the history of the American people than in the history of the United States. I say on the face of it, for, on the level of explanation, the role of the people in the history of the United States, or of any State, constitutes one of the most compelling historical problems. But most of us do not teach our surveys on the level of theories of explanation, in a mode appropriate to publication in History and Theory. So, those who have designed the guides decided to work with the accepted history of the United States as our narrative framework. If due attention to the history of women or, for that matter, the history of other formally powerless groups such as Afro-American slaves, forces a reconsideration of the periodization of American history, it will do so for the next generation. In this respect, our work is provisional. But, at the risk of provoking the antagonism of some, I should suggest that even subsequent generations will substitute the history of the powerless, or of women,

for the history of the powerful only at considerable risk. I count myself among those who expect serious attention to the history of the powerless -- not to mention serious attention to the conditions, forms, and dynamics of power -- to modify our accepted narrative, but not to replace it entirely. The presidency, political parties, the Supreme Court, the Congress, and the rest should probably not be dismissed as mere epiphenomena. Access to those positions, or even to the political process that helps to determine who shall have access to them is an important element of the history of any group. So is the lack of such access.

But, you may fairly ask, if the prevailing narrative structure is to be defended, why overburden the guides with material drawn primarily from the history of women? To this question too there is an answer. We worked on the assumption that survey instructors were already in command of the standard narrative. What they needed, we thought, was an introduction to women's history -- especially to those aspects of women's history that pertained most directly to received notions of "real" historical process. We accordingly took as our mission to introduce survey instructors to those aspects of women's history that most readily lent themselves to integration into a conventional course.

Much of the material we have suggested pertains to what I have called the history of the American people, derives, if you prefer, from the new social history. But, in presenting it, we have attempted to demonstrate its relevance to what is increasingly called "mainstream" history. We have also tried

to suggest a variety of strategies for introducing themes from women's history into existing courses. If you look closely at the guides, you will, we hope, recognize that we are offering possibilities. And, it must be admitted, those possibilities do not begin to exhaust the rich findings of women's history. Even an instructor who accepted most or all of our suggestions would not be transforming the survey into a course in women's history, much less offering a comprehensive survey of women's history as it would be taught by specialists.

The introduction to the guides points out that any attempt to introduce women's history into the survey course imposes choices. Each new set of textbooks includes a new decade from the twentieth century, making the scramble to "cover the material" ever more breathless. Those who have worked on the guides have unabashedly argued that recognition of women's history forces us to rethink our choices, to rethink what constitutes the essence of the material. There can be no doubt that the crucial choice -- and one that pertains not merely to women -- is that between the history of the United States and the history of the American people. As our outline testifies, we are not advocating the substitution of social for political and institutional history. But as the strategies we suggest for various units testify, we are advocating somewhat more attention to social history than would have been considered normal a decade or two ago. In addition, we are rather more forcefully suggesting that such social history as is introduced must be half the social history of women -- on the simple grounds that women normally constitute half of a society and that when they do not

that in itself is a fact of historical import. But we have not restricted our claims for the place of women's history in the survey to the claims of social as against political and institutional history.

We have tried to suggest a variety of strategies for introducing students to women's roles in the economic and political life of the country, as well as its social and cultural life. In our judgment, these contributions were not incidental to the history of the United States, but central. Nonetheless, that assertion obliges those who make it to demonstrate the relation between what might be called the formal and informal sectors of politics and economics. In order to highlight this relation and to establish it as a logical -- indeed indispensable -- extension of the more conventional narrative, we have attempted to develop a number of themes that permit the instructor to weave women's history into the survey in a consistent fashion -- rather than simply evoking random examples of women's contributions.

The principal themes include: demography and reproduction -- including migration and territorial expansion; economic life; political life; the notion of public and private spheres; war; and community building. You will note that these categories preserve, as it were, the vantage point of society as a whole: The fight for women's suffrage becomes a particular case of the development of the idea of citizenship and the extension of the electorate. You will also note that the list does not include the category of family -- although for much of the country's history the experience of most women was largely contained

within families -- for we have tried to assume that the family was not an absolute, but a special and changing unit of social organization in general. Finally, you will note that the list of themes is hardly exhaustive: There are innumerable possible additions, most obviously religion, voluntary associations, medicine, and education.

The notion of public and private spheres, however elusive the boundaries between the two may prove in practice, is central -- primarily because it seems to have been so for our forebearers. Historically, the private sphere has overwhelming been associated with women, the public with men. But the perceived boundaries of public and private have changed over time. In a very real sense, the history of the United States can be presented as the steady erosion of the authority and self-sufficiency of the private sphere to the benefit of the public. Or, if you prefer, the gradual transformation of household concerns into matters of public political economy and law enforcement. But even this general tendency must be counterposed against a reverse tendency of the gradual privatization of moral authority. The point, over the long perspective of the survey is that the close association between women and the private sphere was long taken to justify their exclusion from formal political life but, ultimately, as the boundaries of the public sphere expanded used as a primary justification for their admission to it.

The distinction between public and private can be applied to economic and social life as well as to politics. The importance of women's productive labor in the household can be taken

as a reasonable inverse proxy for the commercialization of basic production. It is possible to introduce students to the extent of household production in the early phases of American history and its gradual decline with the growth of the domestic market and the progress of industrialization. For those who choose, this theme can be developed to highlight regional variation -- household production remained important in many parts of the South after it had begun to decline in the Northeast -- and the character of the Westward expansion in which the importance of household production recurred cyclically, but in cycles of progressively shorter duration. With respect to social life, it is possible to trace the gradual differentiation of a variety of social institutions from the households in which they were originally embedded: medicine, education, various forms of mutual assistance. With respect to both economic and social life, there occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a gradual commodification of a variety of activities: Increasing amounts of labor and increasing numbers of services were performed for a wage or a salary. Increasing numbers of social services came under the aegis of the government or other public institutions. Women's relation to that growing public sector was ambiguous at best. For a long time, the rewards of most women were in inverse proportion to the extent of commercialization, industrialization, and professionalization. This is not to say that women were not active participants in these processes, but rather that they participated unequally in their benefits. Precisely those developments that could have been taken to decrease the rigid differentiation of male and

female roles were accompanied by increased -- and apparently arbitrary -- insistence upon the innate differences between male and female capacities. The tendency is altogether analogous to that towards scientific racism after the abolition of slavery.

These themes can be presented in concrete form in the survey. Each instructor will prefer to emphasize different examples, but they can be found in the history of unionization, in the history of wage labor and its transformation with the advent of the assembly-line and scientific management, in the history of education, in the history of professionalization, in the history of public institutions such as the prison. From Reconstruction on, the distinction between public, male spheres and private, female spheres becomes ever more entwined with the problems of class relations in a democratic society based on industrial and then monopoly capitalism. That tension is to complex for me to trace here, but it can be graphically captured in the juxtaposition of political bosses and female Temperance leaders and settlement workers.

The theme of community building is closely related to that of public and private spheres. For the very notion of community sought to bridge the gap between the two -- to ensure a measure of social harmony and a respectable level of mutual assistance. From the beginnings of the antebellum period, first in the Northeast and subsequently elsewhere, women became the premier custodians of community building. Through various charitable institutions and voluntary associations, women sought to provide some protection and moral assistance

to other women, to children, to the deserving poor, to slaves. Over time, they extended their puview to include various missionary activities. Most especially they assumed increasing responsibility for a variety of services that could no longer be provided by the individual household and would only much later be provided by the state. Their role in humanizing and civilizing the West is justifiably proverbial. Women did want churches, schools, lawfulness, and the other accoutrements of decent life. They did fight for the eradication of drunkeness and prostitution in the interests of promoting decent, safe communities. They did favor the protection of at least the deserving among the powerless from the purported exigencies of the powerful. Here, too, concrete examples are easy to find and to weave into a coherent narrative.

The discussion of themes could be extended indefinitely, but I am pressing the limits of my time. So let me conclude with two brief observations. The first concerns the unfashionable question of "women worthies," the second concerns the question of choices.

While working on this project and consulting on the general problem of "mainstreaming" women's history, I have noticed that historians of women remain, understandably, hostile to the idea that a sprinkling of famous women can be substituted for serious consideration of women's history. I have also noticed that survey instructors who are not historians of women and who are frequently men are pathetically eager for suggestions concerning famous women they can introduce into their lectures. I especially recall, with a mixture

of amusement and chagrin, the pained expression on the face of a splendid young women's historian who had moved heaven and earth to organize a session on "mainstreaming" for her otherwise all male department, when one of her senior colleagues, who was beginning to show some interest in including some material on women, eagerly asked me if he could not introduce the names of some movie actresses and fashion designers into his course on the twentieth century. He thought he was finally getting the point; she thought he had irrevocably missed it. I felt hopelessly torn between the two.

The contretemps illustrates an important problem in all attempts to integrate women's history into the survey. Historians of women, and probably most women, almost involuntarily react against substituting single, exemplary women for the experience of most women. To them, the tactic uncomfortably recalls the objectification of women or the patronizing remembrance of the ladies. It becomes less palatable yet when the women to be evoked are entertainers or the wives or mothers of heros. And they may be correct in discerning a persisting unwillingness on the part of some men to take women seriously for their own accomplishments or to doubt the ubiquity of male dominance. But such attitudes alone cannot fully account for a long-time survey instructor's desire to fasten on to a few specific women worthies. Survey teaching still requires a narrative if we are to hold the attention of restless students, and a narrative normally requires characters. It is easier to lecture about presidents than about social indicators. And history has not afforded us an adequate supply of female presi-

dents.

No, I do not oppose the rediscovery of women worthies to add to the cast of survey characters, although here I speak only for myself. I do not even oppose invoking the names of female movie actors -- although admittedly it must be done with great caution. And surely my friends and colleagues who object to the use of presidents' wives cannot object to discussing Eleanor Roosevelt. There are two issues here. The first concerns whether women worthies accurately represent the experience of most women. And here I can only say that we do not normally neglect the presidents because they do not accurately represent the experience of most men. The second, and more serious issue, concerns the principles according to which we select our women worthies and the context in which we present them. Women's historians are understandably committed to presenting women who can be taken seriously as public figures: Eleanor Roosevelt had an important, independent public role, not to be confused with some trivial symbol of presidential domesticity. But then Eleanor Roosevelt could only play that role to the hilt because she was married to the president, and could only play that role as a presidential wife because she lived in the twentieth century. My point is not that we should substitute presidents' wives for independent female leaders, but that we should embrace every opportunity to take account of women's roles even if those roles do not entirely conform to our own current standards for women. We may not like the influence exercised on American women by movie stars, but it is hard to dispute the existence of the influence. And recognizing it adds something to our under-

standing of the ways in which women understood and fashioned their place in American society. As for the more conventional and acceptable women worthies, it seems to me that our main challenge is to present them as legitimate representatives of women's experience. To take but one example, Clara Barton should not be presented in isolation, as an angel of mercy, but should be firmly grounded in women's important roles in the Sanitation Commission and other aspects of the Civil War as well as in the emergence of nursing as a profession for women precisely at the moment of the expanding claims of medicine as a profession for men.

Now, finally, to the problem of choices. If an instructor adopts any significant part of the suggestions presented in these guides, he or she will have to drop other items. And the suggestions propose more than simple substitutions at the level of anecdotes and fillers. We do not presume to make others' choices for them. But we hope that we have demonstrated that women's history is an essential component not merely of the history of the American people but of the United States. The success and rate of reproduction of the early settlements can be almost directly correlated to the presence or absence of women among the settlers. Women were active participants in the mobilization of public opinion and the implementation of boycotts prior to the American Revolution, and they provided indispensable services to the Revolutionary armies. Antebellum reform and abolitionism cannot be taught responsibly without attention to women's roles not merely in abolition but in temperance and the early movement for women's rights as well.

The silencing of women's petitioning voices by the Gag Rule must be considered in the move from abolition to anti-slavery politics. The choice between votes for black men and white women embodied in the fourteenth amendment accurately reflects contemporaneous attitudes towards the tensions of race, class, and gender in American politics. That progress from communitarian pluralism to hard politics and gender segregation would be recapitulated by the labor movement in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have already mentioned the struggle between political bosses and female reformers for the direction of urban development. It is hard to imagine teaching Progressivism without attention to women's multiple roles. I could continue, but shall refrain. The choices are yours. But the evidence suggests that if you do not choose to take some account of women's history, your account of American history will simply be incomplete.